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SUBJECT: BELGIUM'S ELECTION CAMPAIGN

A Flash In the Pan

¶1. (U) Belgian electoral campaigns are short affairs, lasting little more than a month, with important decisions having been made long before the electorate is called to the polls. At this point, the parties have completed their candidate tickets, which translates into a guaranteed seat in the new Parliament for most parliamentarians standing for re-election. The upcoming election is really about the swing seats ? those positions opened by departing MPs. With the outcome of the election unpredictable, and because Belgian politics features many small parties due to ideology and linguistic divisions, a few seats shifting from one party to another can have far reaching effects.

Five Contenders for the Highest Office

¶2. (U) The political parties have completed their policy platforms, with few themes and divisive issues to impact the campaign. Party leaders know only too well that unrelated events, more than issues, can have a dramatic impact on the final tally. (In 1999 a food poisoning incident directly contributed to the fall of then Prime Minister Jean-Luc Dehaene, a Flemish Christian Democrat.) The present campaign may be short on themes, but it is not short on personalities. For the first time in election history, five politicians are openly vying for Prime Minister: the outgoing PM Guy Verhofstadt, the Socialist leaders Johan Vande Lanotte (SP.A) and Elio Di Rupo (PS) respectively from the Flemish and Francophone sides, the Francophone Liberal (MR) leader Didier Reynders, and the Flemish Christian Democratic (CD&V) opposition leader Yves Leterme.

Socialist-Liberal Blues

¶3. (SBU) The field of contenders is packed because there is a general "purple blues." After eight years in power the Liberal-Socialist coalition (hence the blue and red mix) has lost much of its drive and appeal. Socialist and Liberals leaders, while standing by what they have achieved over the past eight years, argue that the upcoming election is not about continuing the current coalition. But there is little doubt that if they command a majority in both houses of parliament, Socialists and Liberals will continue the purple coalition for another four years. And if needed, they may also seek the support of the two Green parties, the Flemish Groen! and Francophone Ecolo, harking back to the composition of PM Verhofstadt's first cabinet.

¶4. (SBU) Another main feature of the present campaign is the bitter confrontation between Di Rupo and Reynders. The Francophone Liberals (MR) of Vice Premier Didier Reynders remain traumatized by the change in coalition following the 2004 regional elections, when Di Rupo dropped the MR to form a Walloon regional coalition government with the Francophone Christian Democrats (CDH) of Joelle Milquet. Perceiving now that Socialist and Christian Democrats are too close for comfort (and mindful that previous coalitions linked Liberals and Christian Democrats), Reynders has started attacking Di Rupo, and the confrontation has already deteriorated to the point that two are now insulting each other. Di Rupo is irked by the role MR politicians have played in unearthing the scandals involving local Socialist officials, especially in Di Rupo's own Hainaut Province. Moreover, Reynders continues to criticize PS Justice Minister Laurette Onkelinx, claiming her tenure as Justice Minister has been a failure. Philippe Moureaux, the Brussels-based number two in the PS, has already publicly pleaded for a Socialist-Christian Democratic coalition. This has resulted in some MR leaders arguing the case of a coalition of Liberals, Christian Democrats and Greens to oust the PS from the federal government. However, many observers doubt this is a workable scenario.

¶5. (SBU) CDH and Ecolo performed poorly in the 2003 general elections, and have every reason to believe they will pick up votes. Both parties try to stay out of the fray, hoping that once the election is over they will join the federal government.

The Battle for the Highest Office

¶6. (SBU) Flanders will be the scene of a direct confrontation between three prime ministerial hopefuls: the incumbent Verhofstadt, Socialist party president Johan Vande Lanotte, and Flemish Minister-President Yves Leterme for the CD&V. At the outset of the campaign Verhofstadt argued that constitutional reform was not a priority for the voters. Aware that his party is not performing well in the polls, he has changed his mind, arguing that the next cabinet should be composed of the three traditional families (Liberals, Socialists, and Christian Democrats), who would command enough votes in Parliament to amend the constitution. As one commentator put it, Verhofstadt "tries to lie in the middle of the bed," casting himself in the role of the only Belgian statesman capable of bringing Flemish and Francophone parties together. Generally, no single Belgian party scores, on average, more than 26 percent of the vote in its respective linguistic group, thus coalition building is the only way into government. Verhofstadt's Flemish challengers Leterme and Vande Lanotte are both pleading for devolving additional economic and social competencies to the regional governments, but are keeping all options open as to the make-up of the future coalition. Belgium's political history shows that a "grand coalition" of six parties is not necessary to amend the country's institutional fabric, as on several occasion this has been achieved with the help of opposition parties.

Verhofstadt's Record

¶7. (U) Unemployment remains the top economic issue. "Open VLD" (Flemish Liberal) Party President Bart Somers stresses confidence in the future and his party is

promising another 200,000 new jobs, to be generated through government measures. SP.A leader Vande Lanotte has added an additional 60,000 jobs to this target. In Wallonia, the PS has once again positioned itself as the guardian of the welfare system, promising entitlements will remain out of harm's way and voicing the intention to carve out room for additional welfare outlays. The PS wants health care spending to increase at a steady 4.5 percent annual real growth rate.

¶18. (U) Another major economic issue is building a war chest to deal with the cost of a rapidly aging population. The outgoing government has generated awareness of the issue and has decided on a few rather symbolic measures. All parties know that, henceforth, more belt-tightening will be needed. Afraid of doomsday messages that might upset the electorate, the governing parties bank on the traditional (if unproven) assumption of sustained economic growth to deal with the aging issue. The promise to cut taxes, on which Verhofstadt's Open VLD built its 1999 and 2003 successes, has lost much of its lure. As the return for the taxpayer has been rather disappointing, the issue is featured less prominently in the present campaign.

The Al Gore Effect

¶19. (U) Former Vice-President Al Gore has also had a major impact on Belgium's election campaign. The environment buzz generated by his motion picture has the two Green parties feeling vindicated and showing growing confidence. On both sides of the linguistic border, but particularly in Flanders, Socialists and Greens are locked in a head-on confrontation vying for the environment-conscious voter. The two Green parties have produced very radical platforms which will be hard to reconcile with those submitted by the traditional parties. However, the misadventure of the Greens in France may have a sobering effect on Belgian Green dreams.

Vlaams Belang

¶10. (SBU) In stark contrast with earlier elections, there is less fear of another Vlaams Belang (Belgium's ultra-nationalist party) onslaught in Flanders. The 2006 municipal elections were a disappointment for the Flemish far right and, since October 2006, the Vlaams Belang has been undergoing its own internal conflicts, with officials defecting and newer members challenging the old guard. In the upcoming election, the party will be directly challenged by maverick Senator Jean-Marie Dedecker, who was evicted from the Open VLD ranks. He has the potential of inflicting some damage on the Vlaams Belang, but the VB was never likely to be invited to join any coalition.

And Finally . . .

¶11. (SBU) True to form, Belgium's position in the world is not an issue in this campaign. Defense Minister Andre Flahaut (PS) has over the years increasingly used the forces as a private army for his personal glory, and this has greatly upset Flemish majority and opposition parties. SP.A leader Vande Lanotte has already warned that there is room to further cut defense outlays, and the idea has not been turned down off-hand by the other party leaders.

¶12. (SBU) Flemish Minister-President Yves Leterme has announced his candidacy. This was a turning point in the campaign, as from that moment on the election was a

direct confrontation between Prime Minister Verhofstadt, seeking a third term, and his Christian Democratic challenger, who will seek to re-position his party in the middle of the political field, the pivotal position it lost to the Open VLD back in 1999.

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